



The World and the Home

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Source: *Social Text*, No. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (1992), pp. 141-153

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466222>

Accessed: 28/08/2009 19:41

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The World and the Home*

HOMI BHABHA

In the House of Fiction you can hear, today, the deep stirring of the “unhomely.” You must permit me this awkward word — the unhomely — because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the “unhomely” be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James’s Isabel Archer “taking the measure of your dwelling” in a state of “incredulous terror.”¹ And it is at this point that the world first shrinks for Isabel and then expands enormously. As she struggles to survive the fathomless waters, the rushing torrents, James introduces us to the “unhomeliness” inherent in that rite of “extra-territorial” initiation — the relations between the innocent American, the deep, dissembling European, the masked emigré — that a generation of critics have named his “international theme.” In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.

In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations. The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world. In a song called “Whose House is This?” Toni Morrison gives this problem of “unhomely” dwelling a lyric clarity:

Whose house is this? Whose night keeps out the light in here? Say who owns this house? It is not mine. I had another sweeter....The House is strange. Its shadows lie. Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?²

My earliest sense of the unhomely occurred in a prosaic house in Oxford, in a narrow street reserved for college servants and research fellows. It was a noisy red-brick terraced house haunted by the hydraulic regurgitations of the Victorian plumbing system, yet strangely appropriate to the task at hand, a thesis on V.S. Naipaul. I was writing about a

small-time Trinidadian journalist, the son of an Indian indentured laborer, a devotee of Samuel Smiles and Charles Dickens, who was afflicted with the most noisy and public bouts of nervous dyspepsia. As I contemplated his tragic-comic failure to create a dwelling place, to ever find *A House for Mr. Biswas*, I wrestled with the wisdom of Iris Murdoch's laudable pronouncement, "A novel must be a house for free people to live in." Must the novel be a house? What kind of narrative can house unfree people? Is the novel also a house where the unhomely can live? I was straining nervously at the edges of Iris Murdoch's combination of liberalism and "catholic" existentialism, while Mr. Biswas's gastric juices ran amok. The cistern churned and burped, and I thought of some of the great homes of English Literature — Mansfield Park, Thrushcross Grange, Gardencourt, Brideshead, Howard's End, Fawlty Towers. Suddenly, I knew I had found, in the ruins of the Biswas bungalows and their unlikely, unsettled lives, my small corner of the world of letters — a postcolonial place.

Working on *A House for Mr. Biswas*, I found that I couldn't fit the political, cultural or chronological experience of that text into the traditions of Anglo-American liberal novel criticism. The sovereignty of the concept of character, grounded as it is in the aesthetic discourse of cultural authenticity and the practical ethics of individual freedom, bore little resemblance to the overdetermined, unaccommodated postcolonial figure of Mr. Biswas. The image of the house has always been used to talk about the expansive, mimetic nature of the novel; but in *Biswas* you have a form of realism that is unable to contain the anguish of cultural displacement and diasporic movement. Although the "unhomely" is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions.

You can hear the shrill alarm of the unhomely at the moment when Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of A Lady*, realizes that her world has been reduced to one, high mean window, as her house of fiction becomes "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation."³ If you hear it thus at the Palazzo Roccanera in the late-1870s, then a little earlier in 1873 on the outskirts of Cincinnati, in mumbling houses like 124 Bluestone Road you hear the undecipherable language of the black and angry dead; the voice of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken."⁴ More than a quarter century later, in 1905, Bengal is ablaze with the Swadeshi or Home Rule movement when "home-made Bimala, the product of the confined space," as Tagore describes her in *The Home and the World*, is aroused by "a running undertone of melody, low down in the bass . . . the true manly note, the note of power." Bimala is possessed and drawn forever from the zenana, the secluded women's quarters, as she crosses that fated verandah into the world of public affairs . . . "over to another shore and the ferry

had ceased to ply."⁵ Much closer to our own times in contemporary South Africa, Nadine Gordimer's latest heroine, Aila, emanates a stilling atmosphere as she makes her diminished domesticity into the perfect cover for gun-running: suddenly the home turns into a another world, and the narrator notices that "it was as if everyone found that he had unnoticingly entered a strange house, *and it was hers.*"

Gordimer's awkward sentence, with its rapid shift of genders and subjects — everyone, he, hers, provides the estranging syntax of the unhomely experience. Gordimer's sign of the woman's sense of possession and self-possession ("it was hers"), her ethical or historical transformation of the world, emerges retroactively, belatedly, *at the end of the sentence, towards the end of the book.* The historical or fictional subject is conscious of the "meaning" or intention of the act; but its transformation into a "public" symbolic or ethical realm demands a *narrative* agency that emerges after the event, often alienating "intent," and disturbing "causal" determinism. In *The Human Condition*,⁶ Hannah Arendt meditates on just such a perplexity in signifying the social sphere as a narrative process. "In any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning," she writes, "we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the hero of the story, we can *never point unequivocally to [the agent] as the author of the outcome*" (185).

In order to appear as material or empirical reality, the historical or social process must pass through an "aesthetic" alienation, or "privatization" of its public visibility. The discourse of "the social" then finds its means of representation in a kind of *unconsciousness* that obscures the immediacy of meaning, darkens the public event with an "unhomely" glow. There is, I want to hazard, an incommunicability that shapes the public moment; a psychic obscurity that is formative for public memory. Then the house of fiction speaks in tongues; in those undecipherable mumbling enunciations that emanate from *Beloved's* "124," or the strange still silence that surrounds Nadine Gordimer's Aila whether she inhabits a house in the colored ghetto of Benoni (son of sorrow), or in a "grey area" of the Cape. And suddenly, literature asks questions at the very borders of its historical and disciplinary being: Can historical time be thought outside fictional space, or do they lie uncannily beside each other? Does the passage of power turn the agent of history into a stranger, a double-agent living between the lines?

The process of the aesthetic that I am proposing for the grounds of historical "re-cognition," and as a reckoning with the historical event, must be clarified. The aesthetic as the "obscuring" of the historical event that refigures it through a temporal distancing or "lag," as I've described it, must be distinguished from two familiar genealogies of the aesthetic. It must not be confused with the Kantian aesthetic, which is a mediatory

process that brings existence to its fullest being in a revelation of self-reflection. Nor do I subscribe to that tradition of a materialist aesthetic that sees art as the displaced or overdetermined symptom of social reification — a fetishism of phenomenal forms that conceals “real” ideological contradictions. Both these approaches to the aesthetic involve transcendent schemes of thought and art where the progressive movement of the dialectic at once poses the problem of difference, alienation, negation — at the ontological or epistemological level — and sublates or disavows it in the process of representation. For instance, although Louis Althusser is fully aware of the differential sites of the social formation, and the displaced or overdetermined nature of ideology more generally, the “subject” of cultural discourse is caught within the relatively homogenous, totalizing confines of the Lacanian Imaginary.

In contrast to this homogenous or transcendent temporality of the “aesthetic,” I want to suggest that the aesthetic process introduces into our reading of social reality not another reified form of mediation — the art object — but another temporality in which to signify the “event” of history. I take my lead from what Walter Benjamin describes as the “constructive principle” of materialist historiography, where the “historical materialist cannot do without the present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has to come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history.”⁷ I locate the aesthetic in this time of inscription whose stillness is not stasis but a shock that Benjamin goes on to describe as “blasting a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history.” The present that informs the aesthetic process is not a transcendental passage but a moment of “transit,” a form of temporality that is open to disjunction and discontinuity and sees the process of history engaged, rather like art, in a negotiation of the framing and naming of social reality — not what lies inside or outside reality, but where to draw (or inscribe) the “meaningful” line between them.

The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence. Beloved, the child murdered by her own mother, Sethe, is a daemonic, belated repetition of the violent history of black infant deaths, during slavery, in many parts of the South, less than a decade after the haunting of 124 Bluestone Road. (Between 1882 and 1895 from one-third to one-half of the annual black mortality rate was accounted for by children under five.) But the memory of Sethe’s act of infanticide emerges through “the holes — the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask . . . the unnamed, the unmentioned.” As we reconstruct the narrative of child murder through Sethe, the slave mother, who is herself the victim of social death, the very historical basis of our ethical judgments undergoes a radical revision.

In the denouement of her novel Gordimer provides another example of the complexity of the “unhomely” when she describes what she calls “the freak displacement” that has afflicted the world of her characters. “The biological drive of Sonny’s life which belonged to his wife was diverted to his white lover [Hannah] . . . He and Hannah had begot no child . . . The revolutionary movement was to be their survivor . . . But Aila, his wife, was the revolutionary now.”⁸ In the freak displacements of these novels, the profound divisions of an enslaved or apartheid society — negrification, denigration, classification, violence, incarceration — are re-located in the midst of the ambivalence of psychic identification — that space where love and hate can be projected or inverted; where the relation of “object” to identity is always split and doubled.

Such forms of social and psychic existence can best be represented in that tenuous survival of literary language itself which allows memory to speak:

“while knowing Speech can (be) at best, a shadow echoing
the silent light, bear witness
To the truth, it is not....”

Auden wrote those lines on the powers of *poesis*, in *The Cave of Making*, aspiring to be as he put it “a minor Atlantic Goethe.” And it is to an intriguing suggestion in Goethe’s final note on World Literature (1830) that I now turn to find a comparative method that would speak to the “unhomely” condition of the modern world. Goethe suggests that the possibility of a world literature arises from the cultural confusion wrought by terrible wars and mutual conflicts. Nations “could not return to their settled and independent life again without noticing that they had learned many foreign ideas and ways, which they had unconsciously adopted, and come to feel here and there previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs.”⁹ Goethe’s immediate reference is, of course, to the Napoleonic wars and his concept of “the feeling of neighborly relations” is profoundly Eurocentric, extending as far as England and France. However, as an Orientalist who read *Shakuntala* at seventeen, and who writes in his autobiography of the “unformed and overformed”¹⁰ monkey God Hanuman, Goethe’s speculations are open to another line of thought.

What of the more complex cultural situation where “previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs” emerge from the imposition of “foreign” ideas, cultural representations, and structures of power? Goethe suggests that the “inner nature of the whole nation as well as the individual man works all “unconsciously.” When this is placed alongside his idea that the cultural life of the nation is “unconsciously” lived, then there may be a sense in which world literature could be an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation and articulation may be estab-

lished on the grounds of historical trauma. The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of "otherness." Where the transmission of "national" traditions was once the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees — these border and frontier conditions — may be the terrains of World Literature. The center of such a study would neither be the "sovereignty" of national cultures, nor the "universalism" of human culture, but a focus on those "freak displacements" — such as Morrison and Gordimer display — that have been caused within cultural lives of postcolonial societies. If these were considered the paradigm cases of a world literature based on the trauma of history and the conflict of nations, then Walter Benjamin's homeless modern novelist would be the representative figure of an "unhomely" world literature. For he "carries the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life and in the midst of life's fullness, gives evidence of the perplexity of living."¹¹ Which leads us to ask: Can the perplexity of the unhomely, intra-personal world lead to an international theme?

Gordimer places this very question at the center of literary narrative: "Love, love/hate are the most common and universal of experiences. But no two are alike, each is a fingerprint of life. That's the miracle that makes literature and links it with creation in the biological sense"[275]. To put Gordimer's point another way: the fingerprint of literature — its imagistic impulse, its tropic topos, its metaphoric medium, its allegorical voice — these forms of narrative created from contingency and indeterminacy — may provide historical discourse with its powers of narrative "beginning." For it was Michel de Certeau who suggested, in *The Writing of History*,¹² that "beginnings" require an "originary non-place," something "unspoken" which then produces a chronology of events. Beginnings can, in this sense, be the narrative limits of the knowable, the margins of the meaningful. In what she calls her "in medias res" openings, Morrison stages such a narrative "non-space" and turns it into the performative time of the experience of slavery — no native informant, she writes, "the reader snatched as the slaves were from one place to another...without preparation or defense."¹³ Her opening sign — "124 was spiteful" — offers no respite, no immediate meaning, because the house of slave-memory is not a resting place, not a Wordsworthian "spot of time." "124" is the unhomely, haunted site of the circulation of an event not as fact or fiction but as an "enunciation," a discourse of "unspeakable thoughts unspoken" — a phrase that circulates in the work and comes closest to defining its mode of utterance, the uncanny voice of memory.

To "un"-speak is both to release from erasure and repression, and to reconstruct, reinscribe the elements of the known. "In this case too," we may say with Freud, "the *Unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, home-

like, familiar; the pre-fix 'un' is the token of repression." Morrison turns her narrative to just such an "affect" of distancing, obscuring the "referent," repeating and revising the "un-spoken" in order to make the act of narration an ethical act. "A few words have to be read before it is clear that 124 refers to a house . . . a few more . . . to discover why it is spiteful *By then it is clear that something is beyond control, but it is not beyond understanding since it is not beyond accommodation by both the women and the children* The fully realized haunting . . . is a sleight of hand. One of its purposes is to keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world."¹⁴

If we are seeking a "worlding" of literature, then perhaps it lies in a critical act that attempts to grasp the sleight of hand with which literature conjures with historical specificity, using the medium of *psychic uncertainty, aesthetic distancing, or the obscure signs of the spirit-world, the sublime and the subliminal*. As literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when *something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation*. This act of writing the world, of taking the measure of its dwelling, is magically caught in Morrison's description of her house of fiction — art as "the fully realized presence of a haunting" of history. Read as an image that describes the relation of art to social reality, my translation of Morrison's phrase becomes a statement on the political responsibility of the critic. For the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the un-spoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present.

Our task remains, however, to show how historical understanding is transformed through the signifying process, represented in a language that is *somehow beyond control*. This is in keeping with Hannah Arendt's suggestion that the author of social action may be the initiator of its unique meaning, but as agent he or she cannot control its outcome.

It is not simply what the house of fiction contains or "controls" as *content*. What is just as important is the metaphoricity of the houses of racial memory that both Morrison and Gordimer construct, those subjects of the narrative that mutter or mumble like 124, or keep a still silence in a "grey" Cape Town suburb. Each of the houses in Gordimer's *My Son's Story* is invested with a specific secret or a conspiracy, an unhomely stirring. The house in the ghetto is the house of "colored" collusion; the lying house is the house of Sonny's adultery; then there is the silent house of Aila's revolutionary camouflage; there is also the nocturnal house of Will's, the narrator's, writing of the narrative that charts the phoenix rising in his home, while the words must turn to ashes in his mouth. But each house marks a deeper historical displacement. And that is the condition of being colored in South Africa, or as Will describes it, "halfway

between . . . being not defined — and it was this lack of definition in itself that was never to be questioned, but observed like a taboo, something which no-one, while following, could ever admit to” (21-22).

This half-way house of racial and cultural origins bridges the “in-between” diasporic origins of the colored South African and turns it into the symbol for the disjunctive, displaced everyday life of the liberation struggle: “like so many others of this kind, whose families are fragmented in the diaspora of exile, code names, underground activity, people for whom a real home and attachments are something for others who will come after.” Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an “in-between” temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double-edge which like the colored South African subject represents a hybridity, a difference “within,” a subject that inhabits the rim of an “in-between” reality. And the inscription of this border existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive “image” at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world.

Such a strange stillness is visible in the portrait of Aila. Her husband Sonny, now past his political prime, his affair with his white “revolutionary lover” in abeyance, makes his first prison visit to see his wife. The wardress stands back, the policeman fades, and Aila emerges as an unhomely presence, on the opposite side from her husband and son:

but through the familiar beauty there was a vivid strangeness....It was as if some chosen experience had seen in her, as a painter will in his subject, what she was, what was there to be discovered. In Lusaka, in secret, in prison — who knows where? — she had sat for her hidden face. *They had to recognise her.* (230)

Through this painterly distance a vivid strangeness emerges; a partial or double “self” is framed in a climactic political moment that is also a contingent historical event — “some chosen experience . . . who knows where? . . . or what there was to be discovered.” They had to recognize her, but *what* do they recognize in her?

The history of Aila’s hidden face emerges at the moment of her framing. She begins to speak, “like someone telling a story,” but soon we find it “difficult to follow You leave so much out.” In her inability to articulate her intention, to demonstrate a clear causality of commitment, or even a rational, responsible political ideology we are confronted with the novel’s poignant and ambivalent interrogation of agency: “*Aila, Aila a revolutionary responsible for her acts*” (239). There is no giddy suggestion that Aila’s revolution is instinctive, part of her gendered “jouiss-

ance"; nor that it is the displaced symptom of her domestic oppression; or some fatal return of the repressed knowledge of Sonny's adultery. The political lesson Aila has to teach speaks through her narrative refusal to "name" her choice. With a certain obduracy and greater obscurity, she herself becomes the "image" of historical agency that the narrative is trying to wrench from her as an intention for her actions, an origin for her events, a "cause" for her consciousness. Literature, through its "distancing" act, frames this stillness, this enigmatic historical event.

The necessity for what I've done — She placed the outer edge of each hand, fingers extended and close together, as a frame on either sides of the sheets of testimony in front of her. And she placed herself before him, to be judged by him (241).

Words will not speak and the silence freezes into the images of apartheid: identity cards, police frame-ups, prison mug-shots, the grainy press pictures of terrorists. Of course, Aila is not judged, nor is she judgmental. Her revenge is much wiser and more complete. In her silence she becomes the un-spoken "totem" of the taboo of the colored South African. She displays the unhomely world, "the halfway between, not defined" world of the colored as the "distorted place and time in which they — all of them — Sonny, Aila, Hannah — lived" (241). The silence that doggedly follows Aila's dwelling now turns into an image of the "interstices," the in-between hybridity of the history of sexuality and race.

Aila's hidden face, the outer edge of each hand, these small gestures through which she speaks describe another dimension of "dwelling" in the social world. Aila, as colored woman, defines a boundary that is at once inside and outside, the insiders-outsideness. The stillness that surrounds her, the gaps in her story, her hesitation and passion that speak between the self and its acts — these are moments where the private and public touch in contingency. They do not simply transform the content of political ideas; the very "place" from which the political is spoken — the "public sphere" itself, becomes an experience of liminality which questions, in Sonny's words, what it means to speak "from the center of life."

The central political preoccupation of the novel — till Aila's emergence — focuses on the "loss of absolutes," the meltdown of the cold war, the fear "that if we can't offer the old socialist paradise in exchange for the capitalist hell here, we'll have turned traitor to our brothers" (214). The lesson Aila teaches, requires a movement away from a world conceived in binary terms, away from a notion of the peoples' aspirations sketched in simple black and white. It also requires a shift of attention from the political as a theory to politics as the activity of everyday life. Aila leads us to the homely world where, Gordimer writes, the banalities are enacted — "the fuss over births, marriages, family affairs with their survival rituals of food and clothing" (243). But it is precisely in these banalities that the unhomely stirs, as the violence of a racialised society

falls most enduringly on the details of life: where you can sit, or not; how you can live, or not; what you can learn, or not; who you can love, or not. Between the banal act of freedom and its historic denial rises the silence:

Aila emanated a stilling atmosphere; the parting jabber stopped. It was as if everyone found he had unnoticingly entered a strange house, and it was hers; she stood there.

In Aila's stillness, its obscure necessity, we have glimpsed what Emmanuel Levinas has magically described as the twilight existence of the aesthetic image — art's image as "the very event of obscuring, a descent into night, an invasion of the shadow."¹⁴ The "completion" of the aesthetic, the distancing of the world in the "image," is precisely not a transcendental activity. The image — or the metaphoric, "fictional" activity of language — makes visible "an interruption of time by a movement going on the hither side of time, in its interstices." The complexity of this statement will become clearer when I remind you of the "stillness" of time through which Aila surreptitiously and subversively interrupts the ongoing presence of political activity, using her interstitial role in the domestic world to both "obscure" her political role and to articulate it the better.

The continual eruption of "undecipherable languages" of slave-memory in *Beloved* obscures the historical narrative of infanticide only to articulate the "unspoken" — that ghostly discourse which enters the world of 124 "from the outside" in order to reveal the profound temporal liminality of the transitional world of the aftermath of slavery in the 1870s — its private and public faces, its historical past and its narrative present. The aesthetic image discloses an ethical time of narration because, Levinas writes, "the real world appears in the image as it were between parenthesis." Like the outer edges of Aila's hands holding her enigmatic testimony; like 124, which is a fully realized presence haunted by undecipherable languages, Levinas's parenthetical perspective is also an ethical view. It effects an "externality of the inward" as the very enunciative position of the historical and narrative subject, "introducing into the heart of subjectivity a radical and an-archival reference to the other which in fact constitutes the inwardness of the subject."¹⁵ Is it not uncanny that Levinas's metaphors for this unique "obscurity" of the image should come from those unhomely places in Dickens — those dusty boarding schools, the pale light of London offices, the dark, dank second-hand clothes shops?

For Levinas the "art-magic" of the contemporary novel lies in its way of "seeing inwardness from the outside," and for us, it is this ethical-aesthetic positioning that returns us, finally, to the community of the unhomely:

124 was spiteful.... The house on the veld was silent.
The women in the house knew it and so did the children.

Why, in particular, the women? Carole Pateman argues that the continual "forgetting" of domestic life in the definition of the private/public distinction introduces a negation at the very center of social contract theory. Domestic life becomes, by virtue of its disavowal, a problematic boundary of civil society. It can be reoccupied by those who have taken up the position of the "inwardness from the outside." Which has indeed happened in the work of black American theorists like Patricia Hill Collins, who names the experience "the outsider-within status," and Patricia Williams, who sees the possibility of deploying this status to describe an ambivalent, transgressive, fluid positioning — of herself and her work — "that moves back and forth across a boundary which acknowledges that I can be black and good and black and bad and that I can also be black and white"

It is Toni Morrison, however, who takes this ethical and aesthetic project of "seeing inwardness from the outside" furthest or deepest — right into *Beloved's* naming of her desire for identity: "I want you to touch me on my inside part and call me my name." There is an obvious reason why a ghost should want to be so realized. What is more obscure — and to the point — is how such an inward and intimate desire would provide an "inscape" of the memory of slavery. For Morrison, it is precisely the historical and discursive boundaries of slavery that are the issue. Racial violence is invoked by historical dates — 1876, for instance — but Morrison is just a little hasty with the events in-themselves: "the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God's Ways, anti-slavery, manumission, skin voting" What has to be endured is the knowledge of doubt that comes from Sethe's eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life in the unhomely world of 124 Bluestone Road. What finally causes the thoughts of the women of 124, "unspeakable thoughts to be unspoken," is the understanding that the victims of violence are themselves "signified upon": they are the victims of projected fears, anxieties and dominations that do not originate within the oppressed and will not fix them in the circle of pain. The stirring of emancipation comes with the knowledge that the belief "that under every dark skin there was a jungle" was a belief that grew, spread, touched every perpetrator of the racist myth, and was then expelled from 124.

With this knowledge comes a kind of self-love that is also the love of the "other." Eros and Agape together. This knowledge is visible in those intriguing "interstitial" chapters which lay over each other, where Sethe, *Beloved* and Denver perform a ceremony of claiming and naming: "*Beloved*, she my daughter"; "*Beloved* is my sister;" "I am beloved and she is mine." The women speak in tongues, from a space "in-between each other" which is a communal space. They explore an "inter-personal" reality: a social reality that appears within the poetic image as if it were in parenthesis. It is difficult to convey the rhythm and the improvisation

of those chapters, but it is impossible not to see in them, the healing of history, a community reclaimed in the making of a name:

Who is Beloved?

Now we understand: She is the daughter that returns to Sethe so that her mind will be homeless no more.

Who is Beloved?

Now we may say: She is the sister that returns to Denver, and brings hope of her father's return, the fugitive who died in his escape.

Who is Beloved?

Now we know: She is the daughter made of murderous love who returns to love and hate and free herself. Her words are broken, like the lynched people with broken necks; disembodied, like the dead children who lost their ribbons. But there is no mistaking what her live words say as they rise from the dead despite their lost syntax and their fragmented presence.

My face is coming I have to have it I am looking for the join I am
loving my face so much I want to join I am loving my face so much
my dark face is close to me I want to join.

My subject today has been the nest of the phoenix, not its pyre. I have attempted to show you the world forcibly entering the house of fiction in order to invade, alarm, divide, dispossess. But I have also tried to show how literature haunts history's more public face, forcing it to reflect on itself in the displacing, even distorting image of Art. When the publicity of the "event," or the certainty of "intention" encounters the silence of the Word or the stillness of art, it may lose control and coherence, but it provides a profound understanding of what constitutes human necessity and agency. I have focussed this argument on the woman framed — Gordimer's Aila; and the woman, re-named — Morrison's Beloved. In both their houses great world events erupted — Apartheid and Slavery — and their coming was turned into that particular obscurity of Art. In that unhomely second coming, both Aila and Beloved embody the "freak displacements" of their times. It could be said of these moments that they are of the world but not fully in it; that they represent the outsideness of the inside that is too painful to remember. "This is not a story to pass on," Morrison insistently repeats at the end of *Beloved* in order to engrave the event in the deepest resources of our amnesia, of our unconsciousness. When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the distortions of memory offer us the image of our solidarity and survival. This is a story to pass on; to pass through the world of literature on its thither side and discover those who live in the unhomely house of Fiction. In the House of Fiction, there is a stirring of the unspoken, of the unhomely . . . today.

Notes

* This is the transcript of a lecture given at Princeton University. A number of historical and theoretical elaborations which were inappropriate to the occasion and format of the

lecture will be developed in an essay based on this lecture, which will be published in *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1993).

1. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, (New York: Norton, 1975), p.360
2. Toni Morrison, "Honey and Rue," from a song-cycle for Kathleen Battle, *Carnegie Hall Stagebill*, January 1992, p.12c.
3. James, op.cit., p. 360.
4. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (New York: Signet, 1987) p. 198-9
5. Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*, (London: Penguin, 1985) p. 70-71
6. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958).
7. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p.262.
8. Nadine Gordimer, *My Son's Story*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), p. 241-2.
9. *Goethe's Literary Essays*, ed.J.E.Spingarn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921), p.98-9
10. *The Autobiography of Goethe*, ed.John Oxenford, (London: Henry G.Bohn, 1948), p.467.
11. Walter Benjamin, op. cit., p.86.
12. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 90-91.
13. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Thoughts Unspoken," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Fall 1990, p.32.
14. Ibid., p.32.
15. Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) p. 1-13.
16. Robert Bernasconi in "Levinas's Ethical Discourse, Between Individuation and Universality," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Bernasconi and Critchley, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.90.

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